DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 176 358 CS 502 636

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TITLE Appia, Craig and the Actor: A New Look.
PUB DATE Aug 77
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Theatre Association (Chicago, Illinois, August 14-17, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Acting; *Drama; *Motion; *Theater Arts
IDENTIFIERS *Appia (Adolphe); *Craig (Edward Gordon)

ABSTRACT

Despite the amount of attention paid Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig, a misconception persists with regard to their ideas concerning the actor; namely, that Appia had the actor dominate all the elements of staging, and that Craig considered the actor less essential. However, to both, the actor was both essential and nonessential to the degree that the actor could or could not provide the perfect medium for movement that was for both the focal point of their staging concepts. For Craig, the supreme force in theater was movement while Appia understood music to be the supreme force and movement to be the synthesizing force uniting music and the other elements of staging. Although it appears from their writings that Craig rejects the actor while Appia stresses the actor's importance, in fact both are depersonalizing the actor, only from different directions. They each wanted a perfect figure, human or mechanical, to let the emotion and power of the music come through a living body that had cast off all its own individuality. The actor, both agreed, is an imitator or impersonator. Though their approaches were different, each wanted a depersonalized, nonemotional, poetical-musical (or symbolic) device as the ideal actor. (TJ)

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Appia, Craig and the Actor: A New Look

Oliver F. Hubbard Jr.

Despite the considerable amount of critical attention given to Appia and Craig and their ideas of the Theatre, there seems to persist a misconception with regard to their ideas concerning the actor. Dr. Walther R. Volbach, in commenting on the 1914 meeting between Craig and Appia, makes a concluding observation about the two men that we need to carefully consider. "There was a strong resemblance in their views of space settings, the role of lighting, and the importance of movement in staging. However, their conflicting opinion about the actor's place let them go in opposite directions; while Appia had the actor dominate all the elements of staging, Craig considered him less essential."[1] Others have also drawn this conclusion, and most would accept it as a fair evaluation of Craig's and Appia's attitude toward the actor. However, to do so is to misinterpret, or at least to misapply, their concept of the actor and his role. I contend that neither Craig nor Appia was interested in the integrity of the living actor or his profession, but that each was looking for a medium through which he could express perfect movement.

True it is that Craig and Appia agreed on "the importance of movement in staging" and, for this very reason, I contend that their concept of the actor's place in their art form was virtually the same. It is also true that they <u>appear</u> to go in opposite directions in determining the actor's role. However, this latter statement can only be accepted

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if one does not deduce from it that they arrived at opposite conclusions: that "Appia had the actor dominate all the elements of staging, Craig considered him less essential." The actor was both essential and non-essential to Craig and Appia to the same degree, to the degree that he could or could not provide the perfect medium for movement, which was the focal point of their staging concepts.

Allow me to make one more general observation before moving on to a discussion of their particular ideas concerning the actor. We must recognize that each man was theorizing for a perfect theatre, a theatre that was to be an art form, and which as yet did not exist. Appia was theorizing for the art of the word-tone drama, a drama in which music was totally supreme, controlling all other elements of staging, including the actor. This understanding of the supreme importance of music is essential to a proper understanding of Appia's view of the actor's role. Craig, on the other hand, was consciously theorizing for the art of the theatre of the future.

The materials out of which they were to create this new art form were virtually the same, with the exception of Appia's reliance on music. Craig wrote, "The art of the Theatre is neither acting nor the play, it is not scene nor dance, but it consists of all the elements of which these things are composed: action, which is the very spirit of acting; words, which are the body of the play; line and colour, which are the very heart of the scene; rhythm, which is the very essence of dance."[2] In Appia's writing we see these same aesthetic principles being explained: "All the elements of the supreme work of art are there--sounds, words, form, light and color."[3] But in order to create an art form from these various elements a synthesis was required, and for both men this synthesis was

provided through the quality of movement.

To understand the role that each man was creating for the actor, we have to more completely explore their concept of movement. Craig, in the March, 1908 issue of The Mask, wrote, "I like to remember that all things spring from movement, even music; and I like to think that it is to our supreme honour to be the ministers to the supreme force--movement."[4] It is clear from this that movement was to him the very center of his developing theory on this new art. Though Appia maintained a different arrangement of his staging elements, making music the supreme force, movement, nevertheless, was for him the only synthesizing force that could expressively unite music, which existed in time, and the other elements of staging, which existed in space. He wrote, "We have found movement to be the sole reconciling factor between the two classes, since it fuses space and time into a single unit of expression. The living and mobile body represents this reconciling element on the stage, and on this account is of primary importance."[5]

To read into the latter portion of this statement, as many do, that Appia is placing primary importance on the actor himself is to misinterpret him. Appia is not here stating any particular concern for the actor, except that it is his body which represents movement, and for this reason, no other, he is of primary importance. If Appia could have visualized another instrument that could better represent movement, it is not hard to believe that he would have used it, rather than the actor. Though Appia did not visualize such an instrument, Craig, perhaps unfortunately, did.

Craig, having been an actor, felt strongly that the living actor could never subjugate himself to the degree that would be necessary for

him to provide only symbolic movement. Thus, in the March, 1908 issue of The Mask, Craig made this startling statement, "We have to banish from our mind all thought of the use of a human form as the instrument which we are to use to translate what we call movement."[6] What Craig is actually saying is that he does not feel the human form can be reduced to such a state that it could be of use as the medium for perfect movement.

At this very point Appia's staging theory has the advantage over Craig's. Appia felt that he could indeed subjugate the actor's body and reduce the human form to an acceptable medium for perfect movement, because of the overall force of music. "We have seen that musical expression modifies profoundly the external form of our gestures, that is, their successive durations, and that the actor has no need any longer to interpret his role but merely to render it clearly, as it has been entrusted to him; the actor's value will be his docility; the music transfigures him. . . he first submits to and then accepts the modification which is the condition of art."[7] Thus, the actor has no need to create or express, he simply moves transfigured by the music.

At this point, as Dr. Volbach indicated, Craig and Appia appear to move in opposite directions with regard to the actor. While Craig apparently rejects him completely, Appia stresses his importance. However, when we look more closely to see what each man is intending, we will see that both men are actually talking of the same process of depersonalization for the actor, only approaching it from opposite directions.

Our evaluation of this depersonalization process can begin with Craig's classic, and most controversial statement, "The actor must go, and in his place comes the inanimate figure--the Uber-marionette we may call him, until he has won for himself a better name."[8] What is the

Uber-marionette? Well, he has been many things to many people, including Craig himself. But for our purposes it is quite clear that Craig was looking for the ideal medium that would provide the perfect movement he desired. If he was at first considering some kind of mechanical instrument, it becomes clear in his later writing that he wanted the Uber-marionette to serve as a symbol for the perfect human actor, who could make himself this depersonalized instrument of movement.[9]

This is no different in concept from that which Appia is proposing when he writes, "The actor in the word-tone drama will come to effect a sacrifice, then, by avoiding the study of emotions. In giving himself over to the word-tone poet, not only does he sacrifice the creation of his own role, but also the natural emotion the role would elicit from him if it were divorced from the music."[10] So we see that their concept of the depersonalized actor is virtually the same, except that Appia is transferring the expression of the emotions and inner feelings from the actor to the music. "In the realm of the imagination, only music has the power to create a milieu in which the body can have an artistic significance. . . When music is added to the words, we see, as a result of the establishment of new proportions, the living human body cast off the accidental coverings of its individuality and become the instrument consecrated to the expression of what is common to all human beings."[11] Is this instrument which Appia is asking the actor to become any different from the instrument Craig is asking the actor to become? With the exception of music, there is no difference.

Both men are asking the actor to become a symbolic representation, and apart from this idea of symbolism it is impossible to understand the Uber-marionette. Craig wrote, "For not only is Symbolism at the root of

all art, it is at the root of all life, it is only by means of symbols that life becomes possible for us."[12] Appia aims for the same kind of representation by the actor, under the sway of music: "The human body, if it voluntarily accepts the modifications that music demands, assumes the rank of a means-of-expression in art, it forsakes its life of caprice and accident so that it may express, under the control of music, some essential characteristics, some important idea, more clearly and fully."[13] Thus we can see that for both men the actor was simply to be a means of symbolic expression through movement.

Neither Craig nor Appia could have any use for the actor if he would not subjugate his emotional nature to the work of art. In fact, this was the basis for Craig's denial of the living actor, "The actions of the actor's body, the expression of his face, the sound of his voice, all are at the mercy of the winds of his emotions . . . emotions possess him."[14] Unless he could subjugate these emotions, he was of no value in a work of art. Appia makes a similar observation, "As soon as the actor comes to feel a close dependence upon his inanimate collaborators, and when he has sacrificed himself to rhythm and emotional depersonalization by forever renouncing his primary importance, then and only then will he be able to approach the word-tone drama."[15] Emotional depersonalization on the part of the actor was the only way he could be of use as a work of art for either Craig or Appia.

Appia carries this idea even further in his word-tone drama than does Craig:

> In a production of spoken drama, the presence of the actor is absolutely necessary to any communication, and consequently he takes abnormal importance . . . But for the author of the word-tone drama, the actor is not the sole or even the most important

> interpreter of the poet's intention, he is rather but one medium, neither more or less important than the others, at the poet's disposal. Once the actor ceases to be the dominant element in production, he recedes into the background to take his place among his co-workers, the various other poetic-musical devices.[16]

We can see by this that the actor was to Appia another poetic-musical device, to be used be the word-tone poet in creating his work of art.

Just as both men agreed in their attitude toward the actor's emotional nature, so both agreed in their view of the actor as imitator or impersonator. Appia wrote, "The actor's art in spoken drama is one of imitation. . . . In the word-tone drama, the actor has nothing to do with establishing this relationship."[17] Again we see the actor relegated to a position of visual representation. Craig also echoes similar sentiments, "I see a loop-hole by which in time the actors can escape from the bondage they are in. They must create for themselves a new form of acting, consisting for the main part of symbolic gesture. Today they impersonate and interpret; tomorrow they must represent and interpret."[18]

The ideal actor, for Appia as for Craig, was the means by which they could attempt to achieve a medium for perfect, symbolic, representational movement. Not until 1918 was Appia to find the means of representational movement he would have his actors adopt. He writes of it in the second preface to Music and the Art of the Theatre: "In 1895, as I was writing the chapter on the Actor, I felt intuitively that some kind of rhythmic movement which would serve as link and intermediary between the actor and the music must be brought to light. . . . Eleven years later, I became acquainted with the Eurythmics of Jacques-Dalcroze . . . and there I found the answer to my passionate desire for synthesis.[19] Eurythmics

became for Appia the means by which an actor could achieve the perfect movement that he desired for him.

Is Appia's idea of the ideal actor, then, any different from Craig's? With the exception of Appia's reliance on music, the answer would have to be no. Is there any difference between Craig's Uber-marionette and Appia's "Eurythmic Automaton?" No! Appia was no more nor less interested in the actor as a creative individual than was Craig. Though it appears that he placed more emphasis on the actor than Craig did, this is because of the approach each man used, rather than the conclusion each reached. Appia's ideal actor was a depersonalized, non-emotional, poetic-musical device that we may label the "Eurythmic Automaton." Craig's ideal actor was a depersonalized, non-emotional, symbolic device that we may call the Uber-marionette.

We must now conclude that the actor was not less essential to Craig than he was to Appia. He was essential to both to the degree that he could provide the perfect medium for movement, the synthesizing force in a new theatrical art.

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NOTES

[1]Walther R. Volbach, Adolphe Appia: Prophet of the Modern Theatre (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), p. 108.

[2]Edward Gordon Craig, On The Art Of The Theatre (Chicago: Brown's Bookstore, 1911), p. 138.

[3]Adolphe Appia, Music and the Art of the Theatre, trans. Robert W. Corrigan and Douglas Dirks (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1962), p. 42.

[4]Craig, "The Artists of the Future," The Mask, I (March 1908). This essay was included in On The Art Of The Theatre, p. 47.

[5]Appia, The Work of Living Art, trans. H. D. Albright (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1960), p. 13.

[6]Craig, "The Artists of the Future." Included in On The Art Of The Theatre, p. 81.

[7]Appia, "The Future of Production," (Translated from the French by Ralph Roeder from the manuscript of an unpublished lecture written by Appia in December 1921).

[8]Craig, "The Actor and the Uber-Marionette," The Mask, I (April 1908). This essay was included in On The Art Of The Theatre, p. 81.

[9]Craig, "Gentlemen, The Marionette!," The Mask, V (October 1912). This essay was included in The Theatre Advancing (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1928), p. 96.

[10]Appia, Music and the Art of the Theatre, p. 40.

[11]Ibid., p. 3.

[12]Craig, On The Art Of The Theatre, pp. 293-294.

[13]Appia, The Work of Living Art, p. 24.

[14]Craig, On The Art Of The Theatre, p. 56.

[15]Appia, Music and the Art of the Theatre, p. 41.

[16]Ibid., pp. 20-21.

[17]Ibid., p. 40.

[18]Craig, On The Art Of The Theatre, p. 11.

[19]Appia, Music and the Art of the Theatre, pp. 3-4.